

WWII forced labor issue dogs Aso, Japanese firms

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After evading the issue for more than two years, Taro Aso conceded to foreign reporters on the eve of becoming prime minister that Allied POWs worked at his family's coal mine in Kyushu during World War II.

But Aso's terse admission fell far short of the apology overseas veterans' groups have demanded, while refocusing attention on Japan's unhealed legacy of wartime forced labor by Asians and Westerners.

Calls for forced labor reparations are growing louder due to Prime Minister Aso's personal ties to the brutal practice, as well as his combative reputation as a historical revisionist. The New York Times recently referred to "nostalgic fantasies about Japan's ugly past for which Mr. Aso has become well known." Reuters ran an article headlined "Japan's PM haunted by family's wartime past."

Three hundred Allied prisoners of war (197 Australians, 101 British and two Dutch) were forced to dig coal without pay for Aso Mining Co. in 1945. Some 10,000 Korean labor conscripts worked under severe conditions in the company's mines between 1939 and 1945; many died and most were never properly paid.

Taro Aso was president of Aso Cement Co., the successor firm to Aso Mining, during the 1970s and oversaw publication of a 1,000-page corporate history that omitted all mention of Allied POWs. Aso's father headed Aso Mining during the war. The family's business empire is known as Aso Group today and is run by Aso's younger brother, with the prime minister's wife serving on the board of directors. The company has never commented on the POW issue, nor provided information about Aso Mining's Korean workforce despite requests from the South Korean government.

Newspapers in Australia and the United Kingdom vigorously reported Aso Mining's use of POWs in 2006. But with Aso then at its helm, Japan's Foreign Ministry cast doubt on the overseas media accounts and challenged journalists to provide evidence.



Labor pains: Prime Minister Taro Aso was president of Aso Cement Co., the successor firm to Aso Mining, in the 1970s. Hundreds of Allied POWs and thousands of Koreans conscripts were forced to work for the firm during the war. YOSHIAKI MIURA PHOTO

Last year The Japan Times described how, in early 1946, the Japanese government presented Allied war crimes investigators with the Aso Company Report, detailing living and working conditions for the 300 prisoners. Yet Foreign Minister Aso continued to sidestep the POW controversy even after his office was provided with a copy of the report, which is written on Aso Mining stationery and bears company seals.

Courts in Japan and former Allied nations have rejected legal claims by ex-POWs, so the U.K., Canada, Australia, New Zealand, the Netherlands and Norway have all compensated their own surviving POWs. Hundreds of British and Dutch POWs and family members have made reconciliation-style visits to Japan in recent years as part of the Tokyo-sponsored Peace, Friendship and Exchange Initiative. Stiffed by the U.S. government, American POWs have also been excluded from Japan's reconciliation schemes — a situation they say Prime Minister Aso has a special responsibility to correct.

Some 700,000 Korean civilians — including teenage girls — were brought to Japan to work for private firms through various means of coercion. Hundreds of thousands of other Koreans were forced to perform harsh labor elsewhere in Japan's empire or conscripted into the Japanese military.

South Korea's 85-member Truth Commission on Forced Mobilization Under Japanese Imperialism began work in 2005. Legislation passed last year will provide national payments of up to \$20,000 to former military and civilian conscripts and family members. The measure also calls for individually tailored compensation based on unpaid wages, pension contributions and related benefits owed to Korean workers but now held by the Bank of Japan.

Seoul needs Japanese cooperation in the form of name rosters and details about the BOJ financial deposits in order to fully implement its compensation plan. Repatriating the hundreds of sets of Korean remains currently stored in Japan, many of them belonging to military and civilian conscripts killed during the war, is another key aim of ongoing reparations work. Company records would greatly aid the process of identifying remains that have been located in temples and municipal charnel houses around the country.

The Japanese government has been cooperating fitfully on "humanitarian grounds" in the case of military conscription, supplying Korean officials with some wartime records and returning the remains of 101 Korean soldiers to Seoul last January. But the Japanese side is mostly stonewalling on civilian conscripts like those at Aso Mining.

Japanese officials contend, rather implausibly, that they do not know how many Korean civilians were conscripted or how many died in the custody of private companies because the state was never directly involved. South Korea's truth commission criticized Aso Group and Foreign Minister Aso in 2005 for failing to supply information.

"I have no intention to explain," Japan's chief diplomat told a Japanese reporter at the time. Earlier this month, Diet member Shokichi Kina asked Prime Minister Aso whether any data about Aso Mining was ever given to South Korea. Aso replied that his administration will not disclose how individual corporations have responded to Korean inquiries.

Noriaki Fukudome of the Truth-Seeking Network for Forced Mobilization, a citizens group based in Fukuoka, has been centrally involved in advancing the South Korean truth commission's work within Japan.

Aso Group, says Fukudome, "has an obligation to actively cooperate with returning remains and providing records because it was one of the companies that employed the most forced laborers. But Japanese companies are keeping a lid on the whole forced labor issue. In the unlikely event that Prime Minister Aso was to direct Aso Cement (now Aso Lafarge Cement since its merger with a French conglomerate) to actively face the forced labor problem, it would have a huge effect on all Japanese companies."

Fukudome pointed to Japan's conformist corporate culture as one reason why very few of the hundreds of companies that used Asians and Allied POWs for forced labor have taken steps toward reconciliation. "Even if one company has a relatively positive attitude regarding reparations, it will not take action out of deference for other companies," he said.

Chinese were the victims of the third class of forced labor in Japan. While Aso Mining was not involved in Chinese forced labor, lack of progress for the especially compelling redress claim highlights Japan's weak commitment to settling wartime accounts.

Postwar records secretly compiled — and then purposely destroyed — by the Japanese government and 35 companies state that 38,935 Chinese males between the ages of 11 and 78 were brought to Japan between 1943 and 1945. More than one out of six died.

Japan's Supreme Court ruled last year that the 1972 treaty that restored ties between Japan and China bars Chinese forced labor survivors from filing legal claims. Yet the court found that plaintiffs had been forcibly transported to Japan and forced to toil in wretched conditions, and suggested they be redressed through non-judicial means. Having previously declared that the "slave-like forced labor was an outrage against humanity," the Fukuoka High Court earlier this month similarly urged "voluntary measures" to remedy the injustice.

Kajima Corp., one of the world's largest construction companies, set up a "relief fund" in 2000 to compensate survivors of its Hanaoka work site, where 418 out of 986 Chinese perished and an uprising took place. The move prompted expectations that Japan's industrial sector and central government might establish a redress fund for all its victims of forced labor, similar to the "Remembrance, Responsibility and the Future" Foundation enacted in Germany that same year. The \$6 billion German fund eventually compensated 1.6 million forced labor victims or their heirs.

Such hopes for corporate social responsibility in Japan were dashed. On the contrary, Mitsubishi Materials Corp. defended itself in a Fukuoka courtroom in 2005 by rejecting facts about Chinese forced labor routinely recognized by Japan's judiciary and insisting only voluntary workers were used — despite death rates of up to 31 percent at its Kyushu mines. Mitsubishi openly questioned whether Japan ever "invaded" China at all and warned judges that compensating the elderly Chinese plaintiffs would saddle Japan with a "mistaken burden of the soul" for hundreds of years.

Taro Aso, in fact, is not the Japanese prime minister most closely connected to forced labor. Wartime Cabinet minister Nobusuke Kishi was in charge of the empire's labor programs and was later imprisoned for three years as a Class A war crimes suspect. Kishi went on to become a founder of the Liberal Democratic Party in 1955 and Japan's premier from 1957-60. Former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe is Kishi's grandson.

Foreign Ministry files declassified in 2002 revealed that Kishi's administration conspired to deceive the Diet and citizens' groups about the state's possession of Chinese forced labor records. Kishi's intent was to block Japanese activists from returning remains to China and publicizing the program's true nature, as well as to head off state reparations demands from Beijing. In 2003, the Foreign Ministry searched a basement storeroom and found 20,000 pages of Chinese forced labor records submitted by companies in 1946, despite decades of denials that such records existed.

Millions of Asians performed forced labor outside of Japan during the Asia Pacific War, very often for the benefit of Japanese companies still operating today. The so-called comfort women represent a uniquely abused group of war victims forced to provide sex for Japan's military. Last year governments in North America and Europe urged Japan to do more to right the egregious comfort-women wrong.

The Dutch foreign minister renewed that call last week, prior to a visit to Japan set to include a stop at the Commonwealth War Cemetery where hundreds of Allied POWs are buried, including two Australians who died at Aso Mining.

Days after assuming Japan's top post, Aso apologized "for my past careless remarks" in a speech before Parliament. "From now on," he pledged, "I will make statements while bearing in mind the gravity of the words of a prime minister." Many are waiting for the words "I'm sorry" for forced labor.

William Underwood completed his doctoral dissertation at Kyushu University on forced labor in wartime Japan. His past research is available at www.japanfocus.org and he can be reached at kyushubill@yahoo.com.

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